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The Persian Gulf Crisis of 1990: What is to be learned from the previous prewar blockade?

As I write these words, at the end of September, 1990, my country is moving fast towards launching a major war, though the decision--evidently to be made by the President--still hangs in the balance.

In a striking number of respects, the train of events in recent weeks replay the most dramatic episode of the postwar era, the one that most strongly conveyed, till now, the sense of being a prewar "crisis." Yet that precedent has not once, so far as I have seen, been mentioned in the present context, nor any of its numerous parallels with the current crisis been remarked.

For those who have studied the Cuban Missile Crisis--as I have intermittently over a quarter of a century, during the last several years as the main focus of my research--or can recall it personally, the following characteristics of the present situation will seem familiar:

1. US warships are intercepting and searching, at gunpoint, ships of other nations on the high seas, implementing a US-initiated blockade.

2. The US is assembling, with all possible speed, a massive, offensively-oriented airstrike and invasion force of bombers, carrier and amphibious task forces and ground combat divisions, to support attack options ranging from "surgical airstrikes" to full-scale invasion against the country being blockaded.

3. The declared aim of the blockade and of the increasingly-explicit threats of air and ground offensives is to force the country being blockaded and threatened to reverse and to withdraw to its own territory a deployment of its armed forces contrary to American interests and security.

4. This aim, and the blockade supporting it, has the endorsement of a majority of a regional organization of which the targeted country is a member (and also--in 1990 though not in 1962--of all the permanent members and nearly all of the other members of the Security Council of the UN and of the General Assembly).

5. It is generally assumed (though not officially declared) that the airstrike and invasion force being built up has other aims as well: ousting the leadership and regime of the country being

targeted and destroying its military capability. The existence of these incentives to attack, strongly argued within the US, strengthens

6. These more ambitious goals--which go well beyond restoring the status quo ante--have not been endorsed by any regional association nor by the UN, nor have the offensive military means that would be necessary to achieve them. A unilateral US offensive would, on the contrary, almost surely be condemned by most states in the region, whose very stability would be threatened by the anti-American emotions such a US intervention would arouse in their own populations.

Nevertheless, US-initiated war appears very likely if the announced US and multilateral demands to restore the status quo ante are not met soon.

7--Congressional elections are coming up in one month. Political calculations--not only of implications for the imminent Congressional elections but for the Presidential election two years off--saturate every comparison of "options," though this is never acknowledged.

8--Prior to the onset of the crisis there was pressure by the opposition party to apply sanctions to the country now being blockaded, with the President resisting such proposals: both before and after the threatening surprise deployment, this Administration policy was described by its domestic opposition as "appeasement."

9--Hence--along with a total failure of the Administration to foresee the military moves threatening US interests, and Administration acceptance of deceptive assurances--the Administration was politically vulnerable when it was caught by surprise. If it had done nothing, it would have suffered in November elections and in the Presidential race two years later both from this passivity and failure, from having failed to foresee or forestall the move, and from imputed gullibility and weakness.

10--The deception came from someone who, while far from a formal ally, was being regarded as to some extent a partner in shaping events, or at least someone whose private word could be trusted. Public accusations of "lying" figured prominently in the President's surprisingly strong response.

11--The strength and speed of the President's countermoves--and of Allied and international support for them--were as surprising to most observers as the initial provocation, and totally unforeseen by the adversary.

12. If war comes in the near future, it will probably be deliberately initiated by the US, its demands and threats having not met with success.

13. However, there is a significant possibility of a loss of control by one side or the other--unauthorized action by subordinates, false alarms, accidents, misinterpreted or misattributed incidents, misinterpretation of alerts or reconnaissance--leading to an all-out "response" or preemption by the other side.

14. Moreover, a third party (in this case, Israel) might trigger all-out hostilities by its own misinterpretations, loss of control, or "defensive" actions (as Cuba came close to doing, by its anti-aircraft fire in 1962) unauthorized by its major ally.

15. The decision-making process is dominated almost exclusively by the Executive Branch, with no decision-making role for Congress, or Allies: the crisis is seen, with a good deal of reality, as a duel between two individuals, the President and an opposing dictator.

Every one of these characterizations, word for word, applies to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Yet, to repeat, there has been in public discussion virtually no mention or apparent awareness of this precedent, in general or in any of its particulars. By comparison, a memo by Howard Morland lists more than a dozen resemblances to Vietnam; analogies to Munich, to World War II, to World War I, to Korea are frequently cited. Never to the Cuba Missile Crisis.

All the historical analogizing going on represents a natural desire to understand puzzling and threatening events. It is worth recording the perplexities of the immediate situation, because what is hardest to remember and understand later is the nature and extent and feel and impact of uncertainty, doubt, confusion, during a particular period.

It is worth bringing the analogy to the Cuban Missile Crisis out into the open at this moment, both for the insight and hypotheses it may contribute to an understanding of this crisis and its prospects, and to correct the unconscious effect of current misunderstandings of that past case of coercive bargaining and prospective attack.

My own best understanding of the Cuban Crisis, much more than the conventional, currently-accepted accounts, reveals possible parallels beyond the surface ones that could explain a number of puzzling aspects of the present situation:

--how the crisis arose, on both sides, including the surprising potential for mutual surprise, and the multiple consequences of attempting a fait accompli;

--what the President's strategy may be, and some alternatives to it;

--the role of bluffs on both sides, their possible risks and rewards;

--what are the risks of major war, and how they might be underestimated.

At its best (from my point of view, Bush's strategy may be essentially JFK's secret strategy in the Cuban Missile Crisis--though Bush is almost certainly unaware of what JFK's strategy really was--and it could be successful just as unexpectedly as JFK's success was a surprise to him. On the other hand, it could fail disastrously in the same way that JFK's approach came close to failing: closer than JFK ever knew.

On the other hand, Bush could be pursuing what he mistakenly thinks JFK did in the Cuban Missile Crisis (this is, I am afraid, more likely); in which case, a disastrous failure is highly likely, stemming in part from this widely-shared mistaken sense of history.

All of this is very cryptic, I know. That is not because I am trying to build suspense but because my efforts to understand and to generate awareness of the dangers of the immediate situation do not permit me to spell out the historical analysis at this moment. (I am bringing this note--begun on September 29--to a temporary close on October 9: on the eve of flying to Washington for a conference in the Senate Office Building on the constitutional aspects of the present prewar situation and the possibilities for heading off an Executive-initiated war).

Still, in the same cryptic vein, let me mention a particular fruitful parallel, on how the crisis arose in the first place. My 1964 study of the Cuban Missile Crisis along with certain much less serious crises that shared certain common characteristics with it--the U-2 crisis of 1960, Suez, the Skybolt crisis of 1962--led me to identify a particular, complex and precise crisis-pattern such that one could predict and explain a great variety of sequential and associated phenomena from a few initial circumstances.

I called my description of these phenomena and how they hung together: "Faits Malaccomplis and the Origins of Crisis." By the term "Faits Malaccomplis" I referred to attempts at a fait accompli that, for one reason or another, failed to achieve the specific effects sought; in failing, I discovered, these abortive efforts often generated crises, to the surprise of both parties. The Cuban Missile Crisis seemed to me the most significant example of this class of crises: until this fall.

In August, September and October of 1990 I find myself watching a prolonged crisis that seems to be enacting in detail the hypotheses of my unpublished analysis of 26 years ago. To say the least, that old analysis is proving a fruitful source of hypotheses, questions, guesses about the current situation. Along with my extreme concern about the risks for the US, and the world, in this situation, I find myself watching events with a special intellectual interest: which I hope to pass on to others in coming months.